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Relative Informativeness and Adjective Position in Catalan **Milton M. Azevedo**

Catalan Review, Vol. III, number 1 (1989), p. 21-32

RELATIVE INFORMATIVENESS AND ADJECTIVE POSITION IN CATALAN

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As in other Romance languages, so in Catalan qualifying adjectives may precede or follow nouns. Some adjectives (like those indicative of nationality) come nearly always in postnominal position, as in *noia americana*, *bandera andorrana*. Others signal a different lexical meaning in each position, as in *cotxe nou* (newly made) vs. *nou cotxe* (recently acquired, whether brand new or not). The majority, however, signal the same lexical meaning in either position, though a semantic difference is noticeable between the resulting noun phrases, as in *una casa còmoda* vs. *una còmoda casa*. This paper is intended to consider that semantic difference in terms of the distribution of information in the noun phrase as a means to convey the language user's intentions regarding relationship between a referent and its qualifier (s).

The traditional view of the relationship between adjective position and meaning is aptly summed up by Badia (1962:150), who states that constructions like

llunyanes terres... boniques pintures tienen un tono predominantemente subjetivo, frente a la posposición del adjetivo (*terres llunyanes, pintures boniques*)... que expresa una cualidad del sustantivo, pero sin matiz afectivo, de manera fría, objetiva. A pesar de lo dicho, el catalán prefiere, por lo regular, la posposición del adjetivo, que parece más adecuada al sentir de la lengua.

The data¹ used for this paper support that statement on the

¹ Except for a few author's examples (checked by native speakers), the data come from a 250-item random sample taken from a corpus of tape-recorded utterances including both live conversations and Catalan radio talk-shows. A corpus of 150 sentences from fature articles published in the newspaper *Avui* was also

higher frequency of postnominal adjectives. In the oral corpus there was a ratio of 84% postnominal qualifying adjectives to only 16% prenominal ones; in the written corpus, prenominal adjectives were somewhat more frequent (26,6%), possibly in part because of their use as a stylistic device. Assuming the sample is representative, it appears methodologically correct to consider adjective post-position as the general, or unmarked, case. Regarding the import of either position, however, it is not difficult to find instances of prenominal adjectives that do not have an evident subjective or affective value, as in (1), or of postnominal adjectives that convey a subjective connotation, as in (2):

(1) aquells alumnes que ... vulguin obtenir la capacitat i el corresponent títol²

(2) vam passar-hi una nit agradable (R)

While examples like these do not invalidate the traditional view, they suggest it is not sufficiently broad to yield a unified principle of adjective position. While characteristics indicated by terms such as objective/subjective, accidental/inherent or contrastive/noncontrastive may be identified in actual examples, they are not per se a determining factor, but rather a surface result of an underlying principle of noun phrase organization based on information distribution.

The theoretical approach adopted here follows the Prague School tradition of word order studies, which has influenced seminal work on Spanish by scholars such as D. Bolinger.³ In the

analyzed. Recorded examples are indicated by (R) and written sources are identified in endnotes.

² Ad in *Avui*, July 9, 1987, p. 11.

³ For a representative overview of Praguean views on word order, see Daněš 1970, Daněš and Vachek 1966, Firbas 1966, and Vachek 1964, and 1966. Studies of Spanish word order relevant to Catalan include Hatcher 1956, Bolinger 1952 and 1954-1955, Contreras 1974, and Terker 1985. Chafe 1970 influenced the present approach, which I applied to Portuguese in two articles appeared in *Minas Gerais*,

language model assumed here, at a certain point in the generation of noun phrase its formants are ordered according to syntactic and semantic rules. Certain categorical ordering rules take precedence, e.g., articles must come before nouns (*el llibre* but not *llibre el*). Such categorical rules hold no interest for the present analysis, as their non-/misapplication simply results in an ungrammatical string. Noncategorical ordering rules, however, contribute to variations in meaning, as in the choice between orderings like N ADJ or ADJ N, N ADJ₁ ADJ₂ or N ADJ₂ ADJ₁, etc.

It is pertinent to mention that prosodic stress placement interacts with adjective position to indicate varying degrees of informativeness. As the phonological correlate of phonetic emphasis, unmarked prosodic stress falls on the last element of a noun phrase. Unless otherwise indicated, the examples considered here assume this normal placement of prosodic stress.⁴

In the simplified representation (3) of the semantic structure underlying a noun phrase, a nominal nucleus (NOM) is connected by a nondirectional semantic link (\equiv) to a qualifier (QUAL).⁵ The nominal stands for a matrix of semantic, morphosyntactic, and phonological information that has an extralinguistic referent and is eventually replaced by a lexical noun (N) (4); the qualifier is also a matrix of semantic features whose function is to characterize (or «modify», in traditional terminology) the nominal.

Suplemento Literário: «Sobre a ordem das palavras em português» (August/9/1980) and «Ainda sobre a ordem das palavras» (August/16/1980). An early version of this paper («Semantic considerations on adjective position in Catalan») was presented at the 1985 meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese.

⁴ The distribution of prosodic stress in the noun phrase in Catalan seems to follow essentially the same patterns described for Spanish by Wallis and Bull 1950, Bolinger 1954 and Bolinger 1954-1955.

⁵ Parallel lines (\equiv) indicate a nondirectional semantic link connecting two formants: $A \equiv B$; a plus sign (+) connects formants ordered as they appear in the surface structure: $(A + B)$; square brackets [] enclose formants linked to each other, forming a set that may in turn be linked to other formants: $C \equiv (A \equiv B)$, $(A + B) + C$.

(3) NOM = QUAL

(4) N = Q

Let us assume that a nominal nucleus replaced by the lexical noun *camí* is associated with a qualifier conveying the notion of 'leading to glory'. That qualifier may surface as a relative clause (4a), or a phrase made up of an adjectival present participle followed by a prepositional phrase (4b), or a prepositional phrase (4c), or a single lexical adjective (4d).

(4a) El *camí que condueix a la glòria*(4b) El *camí conduent a la glòria*(4c) El *camí de la glòria*(4d) El *camí gloriós* / el *gloriós* *camí*

While syntactic restrictions cause noun-modifying relative clauses and prepositional phrases to follow the noun, but since qualifying adjectives may come before or after the noun, several structures can be generated by a nominal combined with a qualifier, as shown in diagrams (5a)-(5b):

$$\begin{array}{l}
 (5a) \text{ N} + \text{Q} \rightarrow \text{N} + \text{Adj } \textit{camí gloriós} \\
 (5) \text{ N} = \text{Q} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (5a) \text{ N} + \text{Q} \rightarrow \text{N} + \text{Adj } \textit{camí gloriós} \\ (5b) \text{ Q} + \text{N} \rightarrow \text{Adj} + \text{N } \textit{gloriós camí} \end{array} \right.
 \end{array}$$

If two qualifiers are present, two types of configurations are possible, as follows. In (6), the structure formed by the linked qualifiers Q_1 and Q_2 is in turn linked to NOM. In (7), Q_1 and NOM form a structure that is itself linked to Q_2 . Despite their superficial similarity, the noun phrases resulting from (6) and (7), have each a different semantic structure. In diagrams (6a)-(6d), derived from (6), two adjectives form a structure that modifies the

same noun, while in (7a)-(7d) a noun and an adjective form a structure that is in turn modified by another adjective.

$$\begin{aligned}
 (6) \ N = (Q_1 = Q_2) \rightarrow & \left\{ \begin{array}{l} N + (\text{Adj}_1 + \text{Adj}_2) \\ N + (\text{Adj}_2 + \text{Adj}_1) \\ \\ (\text{Adj}_1 + \text{Adj}_2) + N \\ (\text{Adj}_2 + \text{Adj}_1) + N \end{array} \right. \\
 (7) \ (N=Q_1) = Q_2 \rightarrow & \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (N + \text{Adj}_1) + \text{Adj}_2 \\ (\text{Adj}_1 + N) + \text{Adj}_2 \\ \\ \text{Adj}_2 + (N + \text{Adj}_1) \\ \text{Adj}_2 + (\text{Adj}_1 + N) \end{array} \right.
 \end{aligned}$$

It is possible to account for the choice among these orderings by means of the Praguean principle of «functional sentence perspective,» which orders formants according to their degree of «communicative dynamism,» characterized as «the degree in which (a formant) contributes to the development of the communication, to which, as it were, it 'pushes' the communication forward» (Firbas 1966: 270). It is suggested that communicative dynamism may be interpreted as a variable semantic feature that conveys the relative informativeness of each format. With due regard to mandatory syntactic requirements, the formants tend to be ordered from least informative to most informative, so that the former make up a referential background while the latter convey the communicative import, or focus, of the utterance.⁶

⁶ Background information and communicative nucleus are respectively the «theme» and «rheme» of the Praguean tradition, or (with slight theoretical differences) the «topic» and «comment» of other authors. See Chafe 1970 (particularly Chapter 15 and references therein).

One characteristic of that semantic feature is that it is a relative, rather than absolute, value. In a given utterance, the degree of relative informativeness of two (or more) items X and Y may be the same ($x = y$) or different ($x < y$ or $x > y$). Another characteristic is that the degree of informativeness is not intrinsic to a formant, but rather assigned to it by the language user, who decides, in the last analysis, what is more and less important for communication.

The application of this approach to the data suggests that in Catalan nonemphatic, noncontrastive noun phrase formants are organized in order of increasing informativeness, so that a less informative adjective tends to precede its noun, without regard to considerations of subjectiveness vs. objectiveness and the like. In a noun phrase such as N + Adj or Adj + N, the higher informativeness of the second element is signalled by the prosodic stress associated with that position.

It seems that the informativeness of an adjective is inversely proportional to the semantic nexus between the attribute and the referent. The closer the attribute is to being inherent, the less informative it is; and the narrower the semantic nexus, the higher the probability that, if they are used together, the adjective will be less stressed than the noun, which is precisely what happens in the majority of cases of adjectives in prenominal position.

Nominals represent extralinguistics referents, and qualifiers stand for abstract features attributed to those referents. For communication to be successful, certain presuppositions shared by language users must be reflected in the choice of adjectives, and there is a direct correlation between the strength of the semantic nexus and the likelihood that a given noun and adjective may occur together.

If the semantic nexus between the nominal and the qualifier is narrow, the informative value of the adjective is low. For example, the referents of the nouns *desert*, *aiguamoll* and *neu*, have a close nexus with the attributes expressed by the adjectives *àrid*, *humit*, and *fred*, respectively. In each case the adjective may be preposed as in (8) or postposed as in (9):

- (8) àrid desert, humit aiguamoll, freda neu
 (9) desert àrid, aiguamoll humit, neu freda

However, while the ordering Adj + N of the noun phrases in (8) is unremarkable, if redundant, the ordering N + Adj in (9) appears unlikely, since those postnominal adjectives add no information to the noun. For example, one expects, deserts to be arid, and to make this adjective the focus of information requires a special context; otherwise the resulting phrase, while grammatical, contravenes the principle of ordering the less informative elements before the more informative ones.

A limit case involves definitional qualifiers, which are so inherent to the nominal that making them explicit generates a tautology, as in *esfera rodona*, *triangle trilateral*, or *rectangle quadrilàter*, whose communicative value is limited to serving as schoolbook examples of pleonasms. In the converse situation, the semantic nexus between the referent and the attribute is negative, and the noun phrase implies a logical contradiction, as in *esfera quadrada* or *rectangle trilateral*. Between the two extremes of tautology and contradiction, there lies a vast grey zone where adjectivization may be manipulated for an ample gamut of effects. For example, in everyday speech the noun *pilota* carries the connotation of roundness, so that *pilota rodona* is somewhat redundant. However, to refer to the type of ball used in football or rugby, an expression like *pilota ovoide* or *pilota el·lipsoïdal* is quite appropriate, and in this context *pilota rodona* is acceptable as a contrastive expression.⁷

The limited informativeness of prenominal adjectives ap-

⁷ In Pompeu Fabra's *Diccionari General de la Llengua Catalana* (8th edition) the entry *pilota* is defined as «bola esfèrica o ovoide», and the entry *rugby* as a «varietat de futbol en què la pilota, el·lipsoïdal...», but the entry *futbol* mentions only «joc de pilota que es juga...» without specifying the shape of the ball. Clearly, there is an underlying assumption that language users are able to identify the connotations of the noun from their familiarity with the culture.

pears to be related to the certain definitional properties of the structure Adj + N, underscored by what Bolinger (1952:1133) insightfully called the «'standardizing' effect that is produced by placing a qualifier before its noun.» In noun phrases like (8), where the adjective corresponds fully to expectations about the referents, its informativeness consists in characterizing a type, without providing further information on it. However, if the language user assigns the adjective an informative value higher than that of the noun, the adjective may be postposed, as in the examples in (9), but in this case it will imply some special effect.

When the nexus between referent and qualifier contradicts shared expectations, the resulting discrepancy between the noun and its adjective is informative, although further clarification may be required. Thus, *nit groga* may make sense in an account of the result of changes in atmospheric conditions: a *desert refrescant* may derive from climatic changes, and *fangar aromàtic* may come about through technological improvements. In such cases, a prenominal adjective would likely intensify the contradiction by «typifying» a noun phrase made up of contradictory terms, as in *groga nit*, *refrescant desert*, and *aromàtic fangar*, all of which sound odder than their homologs with post-posed adjectives.

Which sound odder than their homologs with post-posed adjectives.

A particularly acute semantic incongruity is involved in noun phrases that contradict cultural expectations. Regarding this, Bolinger's remark is pertinent: «the qualifying elements that represent a standard type in a given culture must be preposed» (1952: 1136). Given certain social realities or myths, phrases like *cruel dictador*, *truculent falangista*, *gentil mare*, *amable mongeta* or (to believe fairy tales) *pèrfida madrastra* appear unremarkable. Not so, however, *gentil dictador*, *lúbrica mare*, *truculenta mongeta* or *amorosa madrastra*, where the culture bound nexus between the noun and its adjective is negative and the «type» is self-contradictory. On the other hand, in *dictador gentil*, *falangista democràtic*, *mare lúbrica*, *madrastra amorosa* or *mongeta truculenta*, the postnominal

adjective that contradicts expectations about its referent stands out as the informative focus of the noun phrase.

A configuration involving two qualifiers, as in (6) and (7), can each generate four different orderings. (The letters x and y indicate the informativeness of each formant.)

(10) N + [Adj₁ + Adj₂]

- x < y
- (10a) una sexualitat elemental i directa (R);
 (10b) la ciutat menestral i popular⁸
 (10c) uns carrers foscs, peril·losos (R)

(11) [Adj₁ + Adj₂] + N

- y < x
- (11a) una llarga i dolorosa agonia (R)
 (11b) un tranquil i refrescant passeig pel Pirineu (R)

(12) [N + Adj₁] + Adj₂

- x < y
- (12a) assemblea general ordinària (R)
 (12b) obra cultural important (R)
 (12c) normalització lingüística catalana (R)

(13) Adj₂ + [Adj₁ + N]

- y < x
- (13a) la típica enuresi nocturna (R)
 (13b) nota per a un possible comentari polític⁹
 (13c) ha fet un llarg viatge pictòric, extenuant¹⁰

⁸ J. M. Espinàs, «Que no s'encalli la roda», *Avui*, July 9, 1987, p. 44.

⁹ J. M. Espinàs, «Viatge a l'Índia», *Avui*, April 14.

¹⁰ P. Pujades, «Pau dels jardins», *Avui*, March 24, 1985, p. 7.

In noun phrases patterned afther (10), the most recurrent type, the adjectives function as a set endowed with its own degree of informativeness (y). Their effect is cumulative, regardless of whether they are coordinated by the conjunction *i*. While other factors may also play a role, coordinated adjectives are arranged in ascending ordre of informativeness.¹¹ For example, more specific adjectives are more informative than and are placed after more general ones. Hence, *un vi català i empordanès* is normal, whereas *un vi empordanès i català* is strange, given the expectation that something from Ampurdà is by definition Catalan. The noun is ordered relative to that set according to its own informativeness, designated as x , in relation to y . Thus, in a (10a, 10b, 10c), $x < y$, whereas in (11a, 11b), $x > y$. The latter type of construction, with two prenominal adjectives, is even rarer, possibly because accumulation of background information may be cumbersome to process. That effect may be avoided by placing one of the adjectives in apposition to the entire construction, as in *ha fet un llarg viatge pictòric, extenuant*, where [*llarg* + [*viatge pictòric*]] is modified by *extenuant*.¹² In (12), the set $N + Adj_1$ is modified by Adj_2 , which specifies its meaning. Thus, for example, in (12a), where $x < y$, *ordinaria* singles out *asamblea general* from other possible types of meetings (such as *asamblea general extraordinaria* or *asamblea general anual*). In (13a, 13b) informativeness values are reversed. For example, a physician refers to *típica enuresi nocturna*, which has all along been the topic of the radio interview; here Adj_2 simply recalls that this is the generic case of that medical condition; a reference to a nongeneric case (in which $y > x$) might likely yield *enuresi nocturna atípica*, with the more informative adjective postposed under prosodic stress. Identifying the intended information focus in written data is less straightforward than in

¹¹ There are obvious syntactic constraints. For example, even if two adjectives are equally informative, the linear structure of the sentence requires that one of them should precede the other.

¹² P. Pujades, «Pau dels jardins», *Avui*, March 24, 1985, p. 7.

spoken data. In (11a), normal prosodic stress on *agonia* (which may be expected to be long and painful anyway), leaves no doubt that this is the focus; in (13b) however, a reading with prosodic stress on *polític* makes *possible* all but superfluous; that adjective merely indicates a type of more informative as a reference to a hypothetical political comment that may or may not come to be formulated.

Sequences of more than two adjectives are uncommon. The rarity of sequences of more than two adjectives in speech (there were none in the recorded conversations or radio talk shows) is probably due to the difficulty of processing information as new items are added. Even in writing sequences of more than two adjectives are uncommon, and seem to function only as a rhetorical device, as in *una reglamentació estricta, concreta i clara*.¹³ Noun phrases with three or more adjectives, like *colleccionisme pur, desinteressat, intelligent i sensible*¹⁴ or *nacionalisme ruralista, pairalista, tradicionalista i carrincló*¹⁵ is a rarity in any context. In a sentence like (14), two different groupings are possible (14a and 14b), and in the absence of oral clues, they are both equally likely. In either case, however, Adj₃ is more informative than the Adj₁ N Adj₂ set, hence its placement as the last element in the noun phrase.

The relative informativeness of a formant varies according to its specific context, and it is ultimately dependent on what the language user chooses to regard as the informative background or focus of the noun phrase. Thus predicting whether a given adjective will appear before or after a certain noun is a matter of statistical probability rather than something that may be determined through categorical rules.¹⁶

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¹³ «Escolars, morts a la carretera» (editorial), *Avui*, March 24, 1987, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Avui del Diumenge*, June 7, 1987, p. 9.

¹⁵ A. Estradé, «Intellectuals, nacionalisme i modernitat», *Avui*, July 9, 1987, p.

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